

Homily – 16-08-20 – Pentecost 11 - Bishop Cam Venables

Readings: Genesis 45:1-15; Psalm 133; Romans 11:13-32; Matthew 15: 21-28

Three years ago I shared lunch with a small group of Toowoomba community leaders and an expert in community development from Texas. Her name is Angela Blanchard and she was an inspiring speaker with a passion to see culturally diverse communities flourish.

With humility and great humour Angela described some highlights from her journey... and there were many insights to think about, and apply in our own contexts. She invited each of us to name what we were motivated by? What kept us up at night, and what got us up in the morning? Drawing from her experience in many cities Angela challenged us to never make a place more important than the people of that place.

Now, Angela was talking about suburbs in American cities, but I think some of the challenges she offered are helpful for us to consider as a Church. One of these then is that we should never make the church building more important than the people of that church.

Angela also stressed the importance of identifying the strengths and gifts of a community, and not start with their weaknesses, or what they don't have. If you like, she encouraged us to start with where a community is 'strong', rather than where they are 'wrong'!

In the Gospel reading this weekend Jesus is remembered meeting a strong woman, who he initially ignored and insulted! Indeed, he seemed at first to focus on what the woman did not have rather than what she did. It's confronting to read and listen to and is certainly worth thinking about.

The woman came to Jesus and shouted her request that he help her daughter and in response... Jesus ignored her! The disciples then begged Jesus to send her away because, I imagine, she was irritating or embarrassing them! It seems so out of character. Why would Jesus, who had such a heart for those who were sick, ignore this request? And, why did the disciples not try to persuade Jesus to make the girl well?

As we consider these questions it's helpful to remember that Jesus was a man who belonged to a highly patriarchal religious community which valued men more highly than women. An Jewish man would not talk to a woman in public at that time, even if that woman was his wife! So, when Jesus chose not to speak to this woman, and when the disciples chose not to speak to her, there would not have been much surprise from those observing. In addition, this woman was not Jewish - we are told she was a Canaanite - and therefore she was not considered to be one of the chosen people of God. So again, when Jesus chose not to speak to this woman - this Gentile outsider - and when the disciples chose not to speak to her, there would not have been surprise from those observing.

But the woman was determined. She had a very good sense that Jesus had the power to make her daughter whole again, and she did not give up when she experienced prejudice and indifference from Jesus and his disciples.

I think there are things we can learn from the determination of this woman. When we have a good

sense that the Church could do better in a particular area - we could, like this Canaanite woman, not give up seeking life-giving change. Similarly, when we have a sense that Local, State, and Federal Government could do better we could be more determined to work with others and make life-giving change.

In the Gospel Jesus justified his lack of response by claiming he had been sent only to the Jewish people, and then he publicly humiliated the woman by inferring she was a dog! Remarkably, the woman did not get angry, or respond with insults of her own. Instead, she reframed the insult and offered Jesus a new perspective by saying, 'Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table.'

So, not only was the woman determined she found an insightful way to speak truth to power and this became the catalyst for life-giving change.

There was a significant shift in attitude from Jesus towards the woman because of what she'd said. Instead of continuing to ignore and insult her, Jesus affirmed her faith and granted her request. The woman's daughter was made well, and presumably she left never to be mentioned in the Gospel again.

In this changed response of Jesus to the woman I think there is an important thing for us to note. Like Jesus there are elements of our culture and context which cause us to look down on some people to the degree that we may ignore, under-estimate, and always expect the worst of them.

Could we, like Jesus in today's Gospel, be open to the possibility of a new perspective when we are reminded about the uncomfortable truth of a shared humanity? Are we willing to recognise any of the prejudices we may have, repent from them, and see those people we had previously looked down upon... in a new and much more positive light?

I think we are living in a time when many things encourage us to think in a polarised way: good and bad; black and white; right and left. We hear it in the news cycle when politicians have nothing good to say about those who are not from their party: Labour politicians will not affirm LNP decisions or policies, and LNP politicians will not affirm anything from Labour. Even a short read of Church history shamefully reminds us that such polarised thinking has caused Catholics to kill Protestants, and Protestants to kill Catholics. Who knows what Commandment was being followed when such things were justified, but I don't think it was from the New Testament

Is it possible that we can listen and learn from those who understand things differently to us, in the way that Jesus listened to the insight of that Canaanite woman long ago? In the polarised and polarising debates we often have as a Church do we offer something different to the adversarial debates we hear in many other contexts? Do we honour the simple commandment to 'Love one another' in the way we debate, and talk about those who have different understandings to us?

If we yearn to bring about important change in the life of our Church and society - we can be encouraged and inspired by the determination of the Canaanite woman to keep going and not give up; and by the wisdom she demonstrated in finding an effective way to speak truth to power. And, if you have a sense - like I have - that we have written a group people off - perhaps we need to ask God for help. Perhaps, we can start by praying for God's blessing on 'them'... and see where that leads.

Friends, please join with me in prayer...

Holy God forgive us when we see what needs to be done but do nothing.
Inspire us to move from indifferent and cynical ways of being,
to being active and hope filled participants
in the communities you have blessed us to be part of.
We pray in the name of Jesus,
who had the courage to change.
Amen.